

Culture and language are one, and the same and facilitate human learning and development¹

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Abstract

Language and culture are socially constructed, re-constructed and created, re-created entities, time and time again, and facilitate human learning and development in a society. This article argues that culture informs language which learning as a development of this, and both culture and language are entities which co-construct and co-create each other. In other words, the development of a language is the by-product of a culture, and the development of a culture is a by-product of a language. Then language and culture are one and the same, and shape human learning and development. Culture and language are social and they do not develop or change by themselves - there has to be intentional social interactions in socio-cultural activities in order for human beings to learn and develop.

Key words: Culture, language, thought, constructed, created, interaction, socially, learning, development, by-product, code.

Introduction

Society means the social systems, structures, organizations and institutions where human cognition, language and learning are developed (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Kozulin, 2003), while culture is part of society and ‘comprises the patterns of ideas, values and beliefs common to a particular group of people, their ‘characteristics’ ways of thinking and feeling’ (Inglis, 2005, p. 7). The adjective ‘social’ refers to the interactions of human beings individually in groups (small and large) as members of society in order to learn and develop (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). The development of human cognition and learning in society is the main focus of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). Vygotsky proposed that through meaningful interactions with symbols, signs and created artefacts human beings undertake, they assign meanings for development of cognition, language and learning (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Flick, 2004; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). Vygotsky’s (1962, 1978, 1986) sociocultural theory of learning was informed by contemporary schools of thought in psychology, education, linguistic and sociology (Berk, 2007, 2010; Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Mahn & John-Steiner, 1996), and these are illustrated in Figure 1.

¹ The arguments in this paper previously appeared as part of the author’s PhD thesis at Waikato University, New Zealand (Kekeya 2013).

The sociocultural theory of learning was first focused on human cognitive (mind) development, language and learning in school and classrooms settings. These contexts were viewed as micro-social systems (cases). The theory was later extended to any age group in employment organizations, training providing institutions such as universities and colleges, and other social settings including family and church (Berk, 2007, 2010; Crandell, Crandell, & Zanden, 2009). The major tenets that underpin the sociocultural perspective of learning as proposed by Vygotsky relate to culture, thought and language, symbolism interactionism and constructivism (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Kozulin, 2003; Kozulin Gindi, Ageyev & Miller 2003; Vialle, Lysaght, & Verenikina, 2005; Vygotsky, 1962; 1978; 1986).

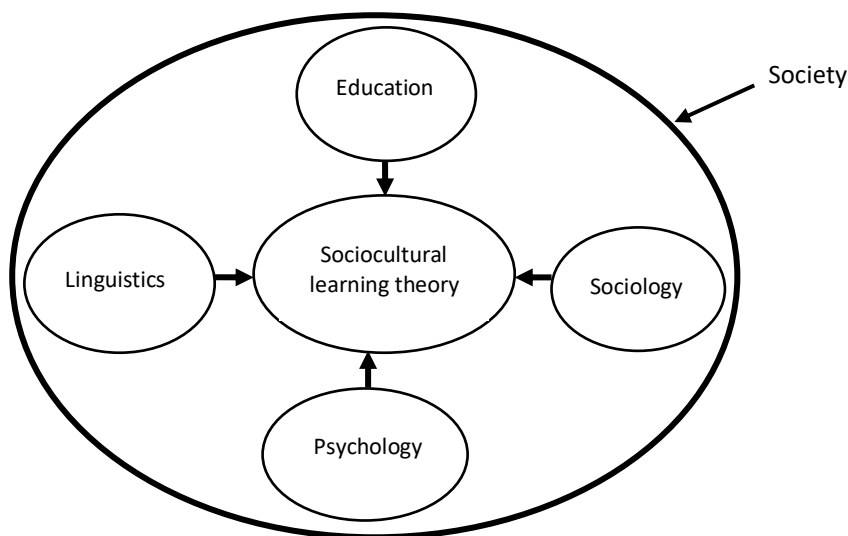


Figure 1. Key influences of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning

Cultural perspective of learning

A sociocultural perspective on learning and development is concerned with 'culture – the values, beliefs, customs and skills of a social group – [being] transmitted to the next generation' (Berk, 2010, p. 23) that facilitate the development of human mind and learning under the guidance of an elder or more knowledgeable person (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). According to Vygotsky (1962, 1978, 1986), the humans' thinking and learning are social and cultural activities, because they do not develop or change by themselves - there has to be an intentional social interaction with the use of language, with other human beings in an activity in order to develop or change and learn (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Inglis, 2005; Kozulin et al, 2003; Vialle et al., 2005; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985), and cultural because a culture facilitates the development of mind and learning. In social settings, the human beings develop their thinking and thought processes from appropriate values, norms, knowledge-structures, models, and categories and beliefs in teaching-learning behavioural

interactions with the use of language under the guidance of competent peers (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Inglis, 2005; Jenks, 2005; Neuman, 2000; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978).

Three interrelated levels of culture that facilitate the development of human mind, language and learning, noted by Williams (1980, as cited in Inglis, 2005) are: *lived culture*, *recorded culture* and *cultures of the selective traditions* (p. 16). According to Inglis (2005) the first level, the *lived culture* refers to the people's daily routines, ways of life, interactional behaviours, how they feel and think as well as their experiences in groups, both small and large 'at a particular time and place', while *recorded culture* is related to the different types of written documents and art which are kept and used in the lived culture. The culture of the *selective tradition* or *high culture* refers to different types of creative art works, customs, attitudes and rituals which are highly significant or best and special for the lived culture (Inglis, 2005). These three levels of culture together comprise 'condense[d] and organize[d] knowledge about the social world' (Neuman, 2000, p. 40).

Thought and language

Thought and language together comprise another tenet that Vygotsky (1962, 1986) proposed in his sociocultural learning theory. People's thoughts are social because they are socially developed through interaction and used as a tool for making meanings during the sociocultural activities they (people) undertake. Like thought, language is socio-culturally developed and is used as a tool for communicative purposes which foster social interaction and meaning making (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Vialle et al., 2005; Vygotsky, 1962, 1986). According to Vygotsky (1962), thought and language are interrelated and depend on each other for human development and learning. He notes that:

The meaning of a word represents such a close amalgam of thought and language that it is hard to tell whether it is a phenomenon of speech or phenomena of thought. A word without meaning is an empty sound; meaning, therefore, is a criterion of word is indispensable component. (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 120)

The paragraph above clearly implies that thought is formed by human beings in their minds and is developed into spoken and written social languages. Spoken and written languages are mediated, and new thoughts again are developed. This is an iterative process as 'the relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought' (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 125). The spoken communicative language is divided into two distinctive lines of social communication - inner speech and external speech, and each consists of semiotics (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Vygotsky, 1962; 1986). Semiotic refers to use of signs and symbols in language, and the process of making meanings through language including signs and symbols (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Mahn & John-Steiner, 1996). For example, in language the signs and symbols are letters of alphabet, the words, sentences and paragraphs and their meanings, while in mathematics the numbering

system and how other symbols and signs are used and expressed ideas and concepts so as in science and other disciplines.

The inner speech is one's inner thought and speech processes, and 'is not the interior aspect of external speech to a large extent thinking in pure meaning' (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 149). This implies that the inner speech and thoughts contain semiotics that are inwardly mediated and internalized as mental concepts or consciousnesses (Vygotsky, 1962). When this process happens 'language and thought start to merge [where] language becomes intellectualized and thinking becomes verbal' (Vialle et al., 2005, p. 58). This is 'when people use inner speech to talk to themselves, they hear words but do not say them aloud' (Bodrova & Leong, 2007, p. 69). When thought is converted into words, both spoken and written are called external speech (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Vialle et al., 2005; Vygotsky, 1962, 1986). According to Vygotsky (1962), external speech is used for communicating with others. Like inner speech, the external speech (both spoken and written words) contain semiotics that people draw from, make sense of and internalize in sociocultural contexts (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). This is where 'a word derives its sense from the sentences, which in turn gets its sense from the paragraph, the paragraph from the book, the book from all the works of the author' (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 146).

Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism was first proposed by Mead (1934) in the fields of sociology and psychology, and expounded throughout the years in sociology, psychology and education (Denzin, 2004; Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975). Meltzer et al., (1975) defined symbolic interactionism as 'the interaction that take place among the various minds and meanings that characterize human societies (p. 1). This definition implies that human beings intentionally grow meanings out of the social activities they encounter, and these meanings again become the knowledge of society. So the interaction has an impact upon, and occurs between two or more people as objects, and/or between person/s and physical object/s (Cohen et al., 2011; Meltzer et al., 1975). This is in line with Vygotsky's argument that it is the human interaction with sociocultural symbolic systems that fosters human development and learning (Kozulin, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985; Wertsch, del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995). Symbolic systems refer to 'cultural artefacts' that human beings invent in sociocultural settings (Mahn & John-Steiner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). Vialle et al., (2005) discuss three (primary, secondary and tertiary) levels of cultural artefacts that facilitate the development of human mental functions in social systems. The primary cultural artefacts refer to physical tools such as a pen, a table, a hammer, a saw or a computer which relate to what Vygotsky called technical tools, while secondary artefacts are like conceptual models, maps, customs, and ethical norms of the society (Vialle et al., 2005). The tertiary cultural artefacts relate to the abstract world such as theories, models, literature, arts, vision, language and the modern world or society that has advanced and sophisticated technology -cyberspace.

Physical tools are used for constructing the physical world, while psychological tools facilitate the development of human mind (Mahn & John-Steiner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). Psychological tools refer to 'symbolic artefacts; symbols, texts, formulae, graphic organizers' (Kozulin, 2003, p. 15) as well as 'language; various systems for counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems, works of arts; writing; schemes, diagrams, maps and mechanical drawings, all sorts of conventional signs' (Wertsch, 1985, p. 79). According to Vygotsky (1962, 1978) psychological tools or signs that human beings interact with facilitate the development of higher cognitive or mental processes. The psychological tools are also called the 'tools of the mind' or cultural artefacts 'that are manufactured and created by people ... of their culture in order to enhance their actions and abilities' (Vialle et al., 2005, p. 49). Vygotsky argued that human beings mediate on these psychological tools, and develop their higher mental processes such as senses, memory, perception and attention (Kozulin, 2003; Mahn & John-Steiner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). Mediation is a meaning making process with the psychological tools or cultural artefacts in order to develop human mind (Mahn & John-Steiner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch et al., 1995). However, Wertsch et al. (1995) argue that while 'cultural tools or artifacts involved in mediation certainly play an essential role in shaping action, they do not determine or cause action in some kind of static, mechanistic way... They can have impact only when individuals use them' (p. 22).

Additionally, human beings' use of language (both written and spoken), their behaviours and actions as well as their roles and responsibilities and status they have in society, act as signs and symbols when other human beings mediate upon facilitate their high order mental functions (Kozulin, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1985; Wertsch et al., 1995). For example, human 'behaviour is dynamic; the human organism behaves (conducts itself), or ... interacts actively in its setting or beyond ... [and the] behaviour is still activity' (Wertsch et al., 1995, p. 75). So the people construct reality on the basis of meanings of the sociocultural signs or symbols they interact with in a social system (Cohen et al., 2007; Neuman, 2007; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978, 1986). Human beings mediate on the basis of meanings the sociocultural symbols or artefacts have, and categorize, argue about, modify, debate and adopt in different sociocultural contexts to generate their own learning or understanding (Cohen et al., 2007; Meltzer et al., 1975; Neuman, 2000).

Constructivism

Constructivism means that reality or truth is constructed and experienced by learners (human beings) themselves in an activity they undertake (Bhadra, 1990; Neuman, 2000, 2007). So in schools 'all learners actually construct knowledge for themselves, rather than knowledge coming from the teacher and being absorbed by pupils' (Muijs & Reynolds, 2011, p. 78 & 79). Constructivist learning was first proposed in the mid-twentieth century by Jean Piaget to explain how children construct their own understanding (Berk, 2007, 2010; Crandell et al., 2009; Slater, Hocking, & Loose, 2003). According to Berk (2010), Piaget's 'cognitive-developmental theory' is based on how 'children actively construct knowledge as they manipulate and explore their

world' (p. 19). This means the children evaluate their own potentials and decide upon and construct their own understanding which grow out from the activity they undertake individually and as a group – small and large (Muijs & Reynolds, 2011). 'Since children are active in developing or constructing their worlds, Piaget's theory is often referred to as a constructivist theory' (Slater et al., 2003, p. 42). Children (people) do not grow their own understanding out of nothing but they construct knowledge through meaningful interactions with the symbols, signs (tools of the mind) and created artefacts, not only from within their own society; they also create knowledge of other societies' symbols, signs and created artefacts. Vygotsky (1962, 1978) proposed symbols and culturally created artefacts being necessary of companions of language to facilitate learning and his version goes beyond Piaget's version by adding more role of the culture. People construct meanings from sociocultural symbols and signs such as languages, artefacts, attitudes and behaviours and act upon or practice to construct and create their own knowledge in school and classroom settings (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

Further, humans make links with their prior learning (experiences) with existing ideas in the activities they encounter to construct new realities (Muijs & Reynolds, 2011; Schunk, 2008). This happens when humans' previous knowledge is converted to mental thought processes and transformed these into new intentional thoughts or mental acts with the activity they encounter in social settings (Hitzler & Eberle, 2004; Vialle et al., 2005; Vygotsky, 1962). Humans apply an iterative process to construct their own meaning by going back and forth to retrieve information from memory and making choices to reach amicable decisions based on their strengths and weaknesses; they then apply the knowledge in different social situations (Krathwohl, 2002; Pintrich, 2002).

Summary

An understanding of the nature of language and culture are one and the same and facilitate human learning and development is depicted in Figure 2. Culture and language (in the central yellow circle) their interactions (red circle), and the construction and creation of culture and language or knowledge (green circle), all of which are located in society (outer blue coloured circle). The following paragraphs explain that culture and language are one and the same and facilitate human learning and development.

Culture and language are one and the same and are social and interact with each other as socio-cultural 'tools' in constructing and re-constructing, and creating and re-creating the culture and language, time and time again as knowledge of society. This process of re-creation or re-construction of knowledge gives rise to culture and language again, and knowledge is banked and coiled downwards. It gets deeper and complex for one to unveil and understand. This complex system of knowledge creation occurs through participatory relationship, where culture and language act as psychological tools. For human beings to learn and develop, they interact inductively and deductively in generating units, categories, patterns and themes from the

knowledge or theory. This interactive process of naming and re-naming of knowledge involves coding with words, signs and symbols, and can create culture and language to identify new meanings. The interactional processes involve a continuous thorough reading, re-reading, sifting, re-sifting, refining, and re-defining the meanings of the knowledge of society.

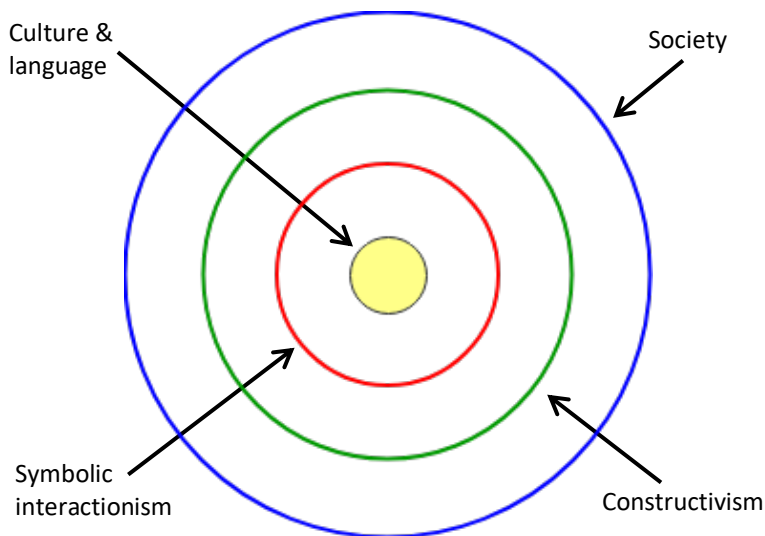


Figure 2. A framework showing culture and language are one and the same, and facilitate human learning and development.

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